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Literary Adaptations in Comics and Graphic Novels

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Abstract and Keywords

In this chapter, the topic of literary adaptation in comics format is tackled from three points of view: first, a historical one (an overview of the adaptation policy in the various periods one can distinguish in the comics/graphic-novel history); second, a semiotic one (a look at the differences between two major types of adaptation, the storytelling adaptation, which only adapts the plot of the literary text, and the medium-specific adaptation, which tries to explore the comics features that are not only added to the story but that often dramatically change and literally reframe the initial story); and third, a properly literary one (an exploration of why comics can be seen as literature and why, in spite of this natural relationship, there exists a certain resistance to the idea as well as the practice of literary adaptation in comics).

Keywords: comic books, adaptation, fidelity, illustration, narrative, wordless

Adaptation and the F-Word: Fidelity

It is impossible to address the notion of adaptation in the comics and graphic-novel formats¹ without first discussing “fidelity,” an issue that has burdened intermediality studies for many decades, certainly in the field of film and literature adaptations, which still is the most frequently studied type of adaptation. The fidelity framework comes down to a simple argument: a filmic adaptation of a literary text is always disappointing, except when it manages to be faithful to the original, but absolute fidelity is nearly impossible. The problem with fidelity is threefold: first, it supposes a single and strictly linear process leading from a source text to a target text; second, it accepts as a kind of dogma that the source text is by definition superior to the target text, literature being a more prestigious medium than film and words, more generally, being emphasized in traditional views of culture at the expense of images; third, fidelity as a frame is mechanically imposed on any kind of adaptation, including, for instance, the comics and graphic-novel adaptations of literary texts. The logical conclusion of this way of thinking is that fidelity condemns the

adapted work to be at the service of the literary source, either by showing by contrast the unsurpassable qualities of the original text or by using the adaptation as a teaser leading to the experience of the real stuff.

Today things have changed a lot, and although the notion of fidelity is still part of most ongoing discussions, our take on it has dramatically evolved (Hutcheon and O'Flynn). Adaptation is no longer seen as a single and linear process; it results instead from many different influences, stimuli, and responses in and from different media, and it includes strong feedback moments. Moreover, an adaptation is now considered a stand-alone product, which needs to be evaluated according its own strengths and weaknesses. When comparisons with the original are made, they should be done not in terms of fidelity but in terms of interpretation, each adaptation offering a new interpretation of an original that is itself reshaped by this interpretation (Cléder and Jullier). Fidelity remains a valuable perspective, though, provided it is itself reframed in economic rather than aesthetic terms, studying, for instance, the financial logic behind the selection of adapted works, the alleged tribute paid to prestigious originals, or the production and rewriting of original works that aim at finding a second career as commercially successful adaptations (Murray). Finally, adaptations are no longer seen as just products; they are also studied as processes, often with a strong emphasis on all kinds of failures that occur during the adaptation process (Jeannelle).

A Very Short History of Literary Adaptations in Comics and Graphic Novels

From the beginning, comics—first newspaper comics, then comic books—and graphic novels, which appear as a socially accepted concept in the second half of the 1980s, have always been characterized by the elaboration of specific contents. Comics were “funnies,” that is, gag strips, before exploring in their way the world of adventure-genre fiction, either via adaptations (the Tarzan character was created by novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs before being adapted in various media including comics) or via more or less original creations (the Flash Gordon character existed in comics before being adapted to the screen but was itself, of course, influenced by existing science-fiction literature). Comic books specialized in superhero fiction, and even if there existed superheroes before the comic books (Regalado), it was the comic-book industry that really popularized the figure. Graphic novels, finally, introduced autobiography in graphic narrative, together with (new) journalism, the biopic, and, more recently, literary adaptations.

What is most striking in this rough sketch is, first of all, the relative absence of literary adaptations, which have only lately become a fad in the graphic novel (even today, comic books usually stick to their traditional genre-fiction content). A second important feature is the systematic foregrounding of the literary canon (contrary to what happens in cinema, for instance, where it continues to be assumed that the best adaptations are based on the worst novels, the good ones being resistant to any kind of faithful reworking). As shown by the excellent collection of Tabachnick and Saltzman, it is a very

small number of works—texts such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby Dick*, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Dracula*, *Othello*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Alice in Wonderland*—that are constantly being adapted and readapted (for the intermedial and historical context of these permanently shifting adaptations, see also Barker and Sabin, who use the James Fenimore Cooper case as their primary example). Copyright issues may explain this narrow selection, which heavily focuses on works in the public domain, but underneath this choice, one finds, of course, the belief that this kind of adaptation has to serve as a springboard to the reading of the actual texts. A third feature is the lack of equivalence, in terms of prestige and stylistic ambition, between the prestigious source text and the often just run-of-the-mill target text, at least in the traditional comics field.

As a matter of fact, comics or graphic novels based on literary works have for a long time seemed restricted to the didactic *Classics Illustrated* series (first run 1941–1971, with 169 issues), which exemplifies the preference given to the literary canon as well as the not always satisfying artistic qualities, to put it mildly, of the adaptation. The series targeted young and reluctant readers, aiming at introducing them to the great texts of the Western canon with the help of very short and very simple adaptations in comic-book format. In spite of the (sporadic) participation of major artists such as Jack Kirby, the series is considered an infamous example of uneventful, one-dimensional, often blatantly silly literary adaptation. That the very philosophy of *Classic Illustrated* is still alive, although in more sophisticated forms, is suggested by the three-volume anthology edited by Russ Kick, *The Graphic Canon*. The fifteen hundred pages of this enterprise clearly exhibit all the major tenets of *Classics Illustrated*, except for one essential and extremely revealing aspect. What does not change is the fidelity program; the editor insists on the fact that he only chose or commissioned works that accepted to “stay true to the source material,” that is, to the plot of the sources. What also does not change is the preference given to cultural heritage (mostly Western, with some digressions to the East). In *The Graphic Canon*, only highly canonical works function as source texts for the adaptations. What does change, however, are the nature of the artwork and the orientation of the adaptation: the artwork is no longer a comic book, but it covers both comic adaptations and (nonnarrative) illustrations, while the major objective of the project is no longer to use the adaptations to bring the audience closer to the originals to be discovered but is for the prestigious originals to upgrade the less prestigious art form of the visual adaptation, and, at least as important, the not always prestigious name of the adapting artists. Not all of them are as well known as Robert Crumb and Will Eisner, the two stars of the anthology, and in some cases, the adaptation is shallow and disappointing, if not slightly out of focus (a considerable number of contributors are illustrators, and their artwork doesn’t make any attempt to shift from image to narrative). Regardless of the quality of its contributions, *The Graphic Canon* thus reveals a landmark change in the adaptation policy for literary works in comics format, since it is now literature that is put at the service of the comics medium.

This fundamental change, which matches the bigger changes in our vision of adaptation as a stand-alone work, had been prepared for by a series of highly personal and very ambitious one-shot adaptations in what were not yet labeled as graphic novels, although for current standards, they definitely should be called that. Among the excellent representatives of the creative take on adaptation that supersedes the limits of the dusty *Classics Illustrated* didacticism are Dino Battaglia, who adapted, among others, Guy de Maupassant; Jacques Tardi, who adapted the first great representative of hard-boiled French writing, Léo Malet; Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli, adapters of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*; Lorenzo Mattotti, the adapter of the Eisner award-winning *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* based on Robert Louis Stevenson; Peter Kuper, who adapted Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; Robert Crumb, who "illustrated" the *Book of Genesis*; and some other less-known artists. The most outstanding example of this approach to adaptation, however, is the Latin American artist Alberto Breccia, without any doubt one of the greatest graphic novelists ever. That none of his books has ever been translated into English is as much an enigma as a scandal. Breccia's adaptations of North American writers H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe and later of Latin American authors such as Ernesto Sábato are certainly not adaptations in the traditional sense of the word. They are deeply personal and original recreations of the source texts, which they succeed in reinventing in ways that are incomparably much more faithful to the literary texts than traditional adaptations. Indeed, Breccia may abandon the more or less literal and correct transfer of the sources' storylines, but his unique and imaginative exploration of the adapted texts, each time in a different style, succeeds in finding a strong visual equivalent of what is really at stake in the original work.

Important as they are, these works are not considered key to the emergence of the graphic novel since the 1980s. The new trend in "serious" comics production is associated with the opening toward autobiographic narrative (Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel) and new journalism (Joe Sacco, Guy Delisle), as well as the critical reworking of the comic-book tradition (Daniel Clowes, Charles Burns, the Hernández brothers) and the investigation of new layout and book-format techniques (Chris Ware), not with the practice of the literary adaptation, which remains marginal, as demonstrated by the fact that none of the above-mentioned graphic novelists has made a name by doing this kind of work (in spite of the quasi-Cyclopean dimensions of *The Book of Genesis*, this is not the work that has made Crumb's reputation). When they make a literary adaptation, this is generally seen as a side project. The work by Spiegelman and others is currently read as "literature" but definitely not because they claim to be inspired by literary works, and there is only a small number of key graphic novelists who seem to specialize in literary adaptations. Perhaps the best-known example is Posy Simmonds, a British newspaper cartoonist whose drawings often satirize the English middle classes, in particular those of a literary bent, and who has made modern reworkings of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

This split may come as a surprise, since the author who made perhaps the largest efforts to impose the label of the graphic novel, Eisner, explicitly linked the worlds of literature and of graphic novels:

The format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, line) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit... . [T]he psychological processes involved in viewing a word and an image are analogous. The structures of illustration and of prose are similar. In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When they are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a distinct language—a literary form, if you will. (2)

Eisner's analogy is open to debate; one might, for instance, compare it with Rodolphe Töpffer's definition of the first graphic novels as drawn literature (*littérature en estampes*, "literature in drawings," he called them), but that is another issue. What should strike us in light of Eisner's claim, which many have considered with more than sympathy, is the strange resistance of the graphic novel to literary adaptations (to which I will return in the last paragraph of this chapter). True, at first sight, this resistance seems to be no longer there, since recent years have witnessed an incredible explosion of literary adaptations. However, the majority of leading graphic novelists continue to stay away from this kind of adaptation, while only a small number of the recently issued literary adaptations are considered key contributions to the development of the medium. In spite of the exceptional commercial success of the six-volume adaptation of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*), the work by French comics artist Stéphane Heuet remains often ignored in scholarly and critical studies on the medium. Heuet's approach, which tries to insert as much text as possible, although in a simplified form, is less bowdlerizing than it may appear at first sight. His decision to adopt the typically Franco-Belgian clear-line style best known for its use in the *Adventures of Tintin* progressively moves into a more pictorialist form of drawing which succeeds in bringing to the fore some of the visual intertext of Proust's novel.

One may even have the impression that, just as the field is infested with biopics of visual artists, the current interest in literary adaptations betrays a kind of growth crisis for the graphic novel. On the one hand, there is a growing demand for serious comics, including in the field of literature, where one can observe a rapid change in the reading habits of the public. Even "professional" readers, such as, for instance, college students, are eager to read graphic novels, not in order to contest in a more or less countercultural way the literary canon as it is handed over in class but more radically in order to replace the reading of literary texts with the supposedly easier and less time-consuming reading of graphic novels. On the other hand, there is also a strong dissatisfaction with the thematic

and narrative shallowness and lack of range and scope of much graphic novels, which have rapidly developed their own stereotypes. As Douglas Wolk nastily stated:

Two ideas that have poisoned a cross section of contemporary writing in general have also seeped into comics a little bit. One is the sentimental memoir—the first-person story that explains why the author is in the right and why the author's pain and sadness are more sad and painful than yours. The other is the toxic maxim “write what you know”: the idea that, even in fiction, an author's imagination has to be directly limited by his or her personal experience. (203)

The awareness of both the growing demand—and thus the need to turn out more books in less time—and the also rising dissatisfaction with the typical content matter of the graphic novel may (partly) explain the success of the literary adaptation, which moreover ties in very well with the still unfinished and in certain cases violently contested quest for status (Pizzino). In that sense, one can only conclude that the quantitative progress of literary adaptations discloses less an evolution toward more mature forms than a kind of thematic and narrative anemia and lack of inspiration and innovative power.

Two (and a Half) Basic Tendencies of Literary Adaptation?

When studying the practice of literary adaptations based on or inspired by literary works—more specifically, narrative works, the corpus of nonnarrative works raising specific questions I will not address in this chapter (see McHale; Bennett)—it is important to make a distinction between two major types of adaptation.

The first type focuses on storytelling and tries to replicate the storyline, the (number and appearance of) characters, and the setting of the original work—all elements that, according to classic adaptation theory (McFarlane), can be “transferred” more or less literally from text to image. This form of adaptation is, however, never mechanical, since many elements of the text, such as the psychology of the characters, will have to be remediated by the new host medium (in that case, there is no “transfer” but “adaptation proper”). But in general, one can argue that this first type of adaptation puts a strong emphasis on the relationship with the original, hence the frequent return of the fidelity issue during and after the making of these works.

However, this text-oriented and story-driven type of adaptation inevitably implies a number of changes that the classic vision of adaptation does not always take into account. I give here three examples of an apparently clear “transfer” that in practice proves always strongly intertwined with elements of “adaptation proper.” First of all, there is the issue of characterization. True, characters who are verbally described in great length and with all kinds of details can more or less easily be reimagined in comics or graphic-novel format. Yet what is much more difficult is the drawing of such a character without the simultaneous elaboration of a surrounding space. In a literary text, the details of a

storyworld can be completely abandoned to the imagination of the reader (in many stories, it may be hard to tell where and when they take place). In a comic or a graphic novel, the visualization of the storyworld comes quite naturally, even if there exist minimalist cases that refrain from materializing the place where the story happens, but these are really exceptions. In visual storytelling, the very presence of character implies the more or less detailed representation of a space, and that is one of the major challenges of any comics or graphic-novel adaptation of a literary text. The second kind of intertwining of transfer and adaptation proper has to do with the fact that in a comic or a graphic novel, one is obliged—once again, in general, for there are no rules without exceptions—to literally repeat, panel after panel, both the characters and the material features of the storyworld. This repetition may go unnoticed at first sight, since we are completely used to it, but it represents an important and necessary change of the original work and a wonderful opportunity for all adapters to make a creative use of this terrible constraint: how to keep the reader's interest in something that has to be repeated over and over again, whereas in the original, it often suffices to give one rapid hint at the spatial and temporal context of the storyworld? A third and last element that shows the limits of "transfer" and its unescapable morphing into "adaptation proper" is, of course, the fact that, contrary to what happens in writing, that is, in writing in print, the "hand" of the author remains always visible—a strong point made by authors such as Philippe Marion, who coined the term *graphiation* to describe the varying degrees of presence of the visual artist in his or her work, and Jared Gardner, who rightly considers this aspect one of the most distinctive features of comics:

In fact, alone of all of the narrative arts born at the end of the nineteenth century, the sequential comic has not effaced the line of the artist, the handprint of the storyteller. This fact is central to what makes the comics form unique, and also to what makes the line, the mark of the individual upon the page, such a unique challenge for narrative theory. We simply have no language—because we have no parallel in any other narrative form for describing its narrative work. In comics alone the promise of Benjamin's looked-for "moving script" continued to develop throughout the twentieth century. Here the act of inscription remains always visible, and the story of its making remains central to the narrative work. (56–57)

The second type of adaptation—which is, of course, not incompatible with the first one, each adaptation being in practice a mix of both categories—tends to turn away from the original work, trying to conceive new forms of storytelling that explore the medium-specific properties of the host medium. Before discussing some aspects of this approach, I would like to stress that the distinction between the two major tendencies does not imply a quality judgment or appraisal; medium-specific adaptations are not necessarily better or more interesting than source-oriented adaptations, and they are certainly no guarantee that the final result will be remarkable per se. It cannot be denied, however, that, at least from a theoretical and critical point of view, modern scholars tend to prefer the medium-specific way of doing things.

Literary Adaptations in Comics and Graphic Novels

Color is a good example of such a medium-specific approach. Colors can, of course, be present in a literary text, in the description of the fictional world as well as in the typography used to print the story, but the systematic use of color, be it the black/white/gray scale or the full color scale, is ubiquitous as well as inescapable in comics and graphic novels. The climactic pages of one of the Poe adaptations by Breccia, for instance, “The Mask of the Red Death” (Figure 1), are based on the literal repetition of a single panel, which only changes colors between its various occurrences.



Figure 1. Alberto Breccia, “The Mask of the Red Death,” *Le cœur révélateur et autres histoires extraordinaires*. Racham, 2018, n.p. © 2018 Alberto Breccia Estate—Rackham

The most challenging cases, however, are those where the adaptation not only involves the adding of an element or a feature that is not present in the original work but also reveals a possible clash between the properties of the source text and those of the target text, that is, in the cases where it proves impossible to keep the original story as it is, even when the “transfer” technique is possible and

the adapting author is sympathetic to the traditional fidelity approach. Rhythm is a good case in point, since even the most literal and scrupulous transposition of a narrative sequence and a story arc will be modified by the fact that storytelling in comics or graphic novels is never a matter of sequentiality only. Panels may follow one another in a linear way (for instance, in a newspaper strip), but in all cases, the sequential deciphering of the successive panels will be modified by the fact that the reading of these panels obeys also a nonlinear or tabular logic. In other words, when reading a succession of panels and going from one panel to the next—and also taking into account that many things may happen in the gutter—one also sees more than one panel at the same time, and often one has already seen the whole strip or page before actually getting down to the reading of the individual panels. This is anything but a detail, not only for visual reasons (many comics and graphic novels organize their page layout in such a way that the whole page constitutes an image in itself) but also for narrative reasons. What about the telling of a gag in a one-page comic or graphic novel, for example? Don’t we usually start reading it in its final panel, where the gag is revealed, before we initiate the actual deciphering of the gag in a linear and sequential way? In other words, how can one tell a gag, which is a genre where everything depends on the final denouement, in a medium that shows us in advance how the story ends? And, perhaps more important, what about the issue of length, of the work as a whole as well as of its parts, for in visual storytelling, too, size matters? When making an adaptation, comics authors and graphic novelists have

to make decisions concerning the ideal length of the work. Since it takes less time, it is often argued, to read a comic than to read a novel, does this mean that the graphic adaptation of a three-hundred-page novel should be a six-hundred-page graphic novel? Similar decisions must be made concerning the spatial position of the elements on the page. Turning the page of a novel may be a neutral or uneventful action, but the place a panel occupies on the page of a comic or a graphic novel always has an impact, and often a very important one (each visual page generates a virtual cliffhanger effect, even when this effect is not intended at all). The construction of narrative tension, for instance, cannot be achieved the same way in graphic storytelling as in a literary text, since linearity and tabularity are inescapably intertwined. Comparable remarks apply to the classic distinction between narration and description, which literary narratology tends to conceptualize as different modes that alternate in the text, for the author is either developing the narrative or writing a description, and when the author is describing, the narrative is suspended—at least, this is what textual narratology generally claims. In comics and graphic novels, given the material coincidence of characters and spaces, plot-driven action on the one hand and visual description of the storyworld on the other cannot be separated, for they occur in the same panel, and one cannot have one without the other. Here as well, one of Breccia's Poe adaptations, "The Tell-Tale Heart," unmistakably illustrates this principle. In Poe's story, a murderer's feelings of guilt result in him hearing a thumping sound, which he interprets as the dead victim's beating heart (see Figure 2). In Breccia's adaptation, which adopts a very rigid and minimalist three-by-three and then three-by-four layout grid, with almost no text but with a sharp contrast between black and white, the only colors used in the eleven-page work, the gradual appearance of the beat is communicated through purely visual means.



Figure 2. Alberto Breccia, "The Tell-Tale Heart," *Le cœur révélateur et autres histoires extraordinaires*. Rackham, 2018, n.p. © 2018 Alberto Breccia Estate—Rackham

As shown by the film industry, the adaptation work cannot, however, be restricted to a one-to-one relationship between a single source text of variable size (ranging from a short story such as Julio Cortázar's "The Devil's Drool," adapted by Michelangelo Antonioni in *Blow-Up*, to a two-volume

epos such as Frank Herbert's *Dune*, adapted by David Lynch) and a single target work (eventually expanded with sequels and prequels). Certain films that are more or less clear examples of literary source texts do not adapt unique works, but other types of sources, such as a mix of works (this is what Steven Spielberg did in his adaptation of Hergé's *The Secret of the Unicorn*, which mixes plot elements from various Tintin adventures), the typical universe of an author (a Jane Austen is never just the adaptation of one book but takes on board the complete work of the author as well as the many ways in which it has

been previously adapted), or even genres (Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution* is, for instance, among many other things, an attempt to blend the two genres of science fiction and hard-boiled fiction). This is also what happens in the field of comics and graphic novels, and it would be deceiving to present an overview of literary adaptations in graphic fiction by skipping this kind of practice, not always easy to detect (generally, the sources used are not credited) but crucial to seeing the full gamut of adaptation policies.

Martin Vaughn-James's *The Cage* is a splendid example of a literary adaptation that is not based on a single work but inspired by a literary movement, more concretely the French New Novel of the 1950s and '60s, as theorized by authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean Ricardou. Drawn in Paris, written in English, published in Canada, but actually made famous through its French translation one decade later, *The Cage* is a graphic novel that challenges most formal traditional features of the medium but whose narrative subtext or intertext makes it into an authentic literary adaptation. Vaughn-James's book is a breathtaking transposition and reinvention of some of the basic features of the descriptive style and antihumanist philosophy of the avant-garde narrative of these years. To start with, *The Cage* has no characters at all, that is, no human characters, and its plot is not action-driven (see Figure 3). The book confronts the reader with a limited number of objects and spaces—and the cage, actually inspired by the fence around a power station in Toronto is, of course, an example of both an object and a space—which change and morph page after page (contrary to the traditional grid layout of comics and graphic novels, Vaughn-James presents only one drawing per page). Besides, the transformations of these places and objects obey a logic that exemplifies the importance of permutational writing in the New Novel aesthetics (permutation is also a key element of constrained writing and anticipates what new media scholars will theorize as “database narrative”; see Manovich). Finally, the basic units of the fictional universe are clearly figurative translations of the basic material features of the production process: objects and places are fictional interpretations of the forms and devices one may find on the table of the artist: a sheet of paper, a bottle of ink, a pen, a compass, an eraser, and so on. In a sense, one might argue that *The Cage*, one of the most modernist works that exist in the graphic-novel field, is both perfectly performing and radically wiping out the modernist program of Clement Greenberg. The latter's plea for a reduction of painting to its constitutive elements (color and flatness) is exemplified by Vaughn-James's concern to limit the work to elements that refer to this material basis, while at the same time it gives birth to a proliferation of “thick” fictional elements and mutations that demonstrate the possibility of elaborating a work based on “nothing,” that is, on nothing else than the materials one needs to make drawings.



Figure 3. Martin Vaughn-James, *La cage*. Les Impressions Nouvelles, 1986, p. 166.

formal constraints to push the boundaries of the medium and which has developed as a branch of the umbrella organization OULIPO (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature”, which has defended similar positions in writing since its creation in 1960. OUBAPO does not literally adapt OULIPO or other constrained-writing-informed works in comics format. Madden’s *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style*, based on the idea of Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style* (the telling of a simple story in ninety-nine different ways, each of them written in a different style), comes quite close to the one-to-one adaptation model. But in general, the OUBAPO authors do not adapt specific works but specific techniques such as palindromes, that is, comics one can read in two senses, upside-downs, comics one can turn by 180 degrees, all kinds of expansions and reductions, and so on. (OUBAPO) (see Figure 4). Although these creations do not qualify as literary adaptations in the narrow sense of the word, one would definitely misinterpret them by not reading them as transformations of literary models.



Figure 4. François Ayroles, “Une traversée des comics,” OUBAPO, *Oupus 2*. L’Association, 2003, p. 85. An example of a “consecutive reinterpretation,” in which the author revisits the history of American comics by jump-cutting between images (here Winsor McCay, George Herriman, and Bud Fischer) built around a kind of UFO.

The most radical example of such an adaptive practice can be found in the production of the OUBAPO group, originally French, now solidly transnational, with American graphic novelist Matt Madden as one of its most active representatives (Baetens). OUBAPO, which is short for *Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Comic Book Art), is a comics movement which believes in the use of

A more classic example of genre adaptation is the *Obscure Cities* series by Benoît Peeters and François Schuiten, an attempt to build a new type of narrative that blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, science fiction and historical narrative,

encyclopedic (nonnarrative) and plot-driven fiction, as well as serialized fiction and one-

shot graphic novels (for an introduction to this multimedia multiverse, see Peeters and Schuiten). Yet the interaction with literary models does not limit itself to the merging of generally incompatible genre constraints; it touches also upon issues of writing style in dialogues and captions, undeniably more literary than in most graphic novels, or questions of literary themes, figures, and techniques, often via cameo appearances of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges.

The Resistance to Literary Adaptations

Are literary adaptations in comics and graphic-novel formats real literature, complementary to and competing with purely verbal texts? Or is this a false question and we should rather ask whether literary adaptations are real comics and graphic novels, not a kind of second-rate work ashamed of its own medium and affordances? The answers obviously depend on how one defines the basic notion of literature and the position one takes in the status debates that still accompany comics and graphic novels. If one foregrounds storytelling in the definition of literature, then the transmedial move from one medium to another should be not so big a problem. But if one highlights the play with words, then comics and graphic novels definitely start with a handicap. And if one refuses the old-fashioned debates on high culture (literature) versus low culture (comics, graphic novels), many reflections on the status of literary adaptations will soon sound very hollow. Yet even if we accept taking the literary adaptation as a stand-alone product, there still is the intriguing observation that, except in recent years, literary adaptations remain quite rare in comics and graphic novels, contrary to what happens, for instance, in the film industry, where adaptations abound.

The reasons for this lack of interest in literary adaptations are multiple. First, there is the fear that this kind of work disrupts the desired balance between text and image. The verbal element is said to become so dominant that the visual part of the artwork is in danger of being reduced to a mere and thus dispensable illustration. The strategies to counter this fear are twofold: on the one hand, one can note that literary adaptations tend to overcompensate the possible hegemony of the text and that they strive to reduce as much as possible the presence of the verbal elements (after all, one should not forget that, historically speaking, the modern-day predecessors of the graphic novel are the wordless woodcut novels of the 1920s; cf. Beronä); on the other hand, one observes as well that literary adaptations are not afraid of underlining the medium-specific affordances of the host medium, such as color and layout, at the expense of the traditional orientation toward action and narrative. A second problem has to do with the fact that many authors do not want to fall into fidelity debates that they do not consider relevant themselves but which they know will pop up when producing a literary adaptation. Third and finally, there is also the anxiety that a literary adaptation project will harm the authorial policy of the graphic novelist, who is expected to deliver a highly individual and immediately recognizable work, not a derivative of an already existing work.

Fortunately, these obstacles do not prevent motivated and creative comics authors and graphic novelists from coming up with often extremely original solutions. An outstanding recent example is *Dispossession*, the adaptation of a typically Victorian 1879 novel by Anthony Trollope, *John Caldigate*, by British artist Simon Grennan (see Grennan and Grove). This work succeeds in striking the almost perfect balance between two apparently contradictory objectives: fidelity and reinterpretation. On the one hand, Grennan offers a faithful replication of both the story and the storyworld. In the less than one hundred pages of the graphic novel, he keeps the essential plot elements of the extremely long and hyperdetailed Trollope novel, and the visual reconstruction of setting, costumes, and, above all, gestures (the author is a specialist in nineteenth-century stage performance) is breathtaking, without ever being too heavy or purely ornamental (in comparison with a Merchant Ivory film production, Grennan's adaptation is nearly minimalistic). The book is a superb example of medium-specific recreation. Its subtitle, *A Novel of Few Words*, can be read as a manifesto: *Dispossession* does not want to rival the original novel by including as much text as possible; its endeavor instead is to obtain analogous effects with purely visual means, exploiting, for instance, the rhythmic and narrative possibilities of the layout, a classic three-by-two grid with regular panels, to evoke the "evenness" of Trollope's prose while at the same time promoting the page as a plot unit (each page is limited to a new step in the unpacking of the whole story), having moreover its own formal and rhythmic unity (the use of color as well as the place occupied by characters who are seen as if performing onstage, the bodily movements and gestures generating a waltzlike rhythm that belongs to the personal reinvention of the adapting artist).

The page that describes the first meeting of the hero, John Caldigate, with his future wife, Hester Bolton, gives a good idea of Grennan's way of adapting the Trollope text (Figure 5). He puts the reader in the position of Mr. and Mrs. Bolton and Robert Bolton (Hester's bother), in that there are clearly things to see that these three characters do not see, and he has also made it easy for the reader to overlook them, even though they are clearly visible and unambiguous. In panel 4, there is a clear view of John and Hester looking directly at each other. We see the direction of the exchanged look over Hester's shoulder. Her mother, father, and brother are unaware of this look. In panel 5, John holds Hester's fingers. Again, Mr. and Mrs. Bolton and Robert are unaware. These rather subtle visualizations are completely clear, as well as being potentially easy to miss. This sense, on the reader's part, of John's deftness, impertinence, and slyness (he shouldn't be looking or touching; he does it almost without the reader noticing) corresponds quite literally to the sense of the meeting in Trollope's description, which goes as follows:

On the next morning as he took his departure, Mr. Bolton said a word intended to be gracious. "I hope you may succeed in your enterprise, Mr. Caldigate."

"Why should I not as well as another?" said John, cheerily.

"If you are steady, sober, industrious, self-denying and honest, you probably will," replied the banker.

"To promise all that would be to promise too much," said John. "But I mean to make an effort."

Then at that moment he made one effort which was successful. For an instant he held Hester's fingers within his hand. (18–19)



Figure 5. Simon Grennan, *Dispossession*, Jonathan Cape, 2015, p. 18.

In short, it is not an exaggeration to argue that the status of the literary adaptation is not deprived of ambivalences. Yet the tensions that appear between word and image, story and storytelling, authentic and derivative, personal and anonymous, or high and low are very representative of the questions that current trends in comics and graphic-novel writing have been disclosing. In that sense, the question of the literary adaptation is a

possible shortcut for the many challenges and opportunities the comics medium in general is facing today. And one of the most urgent issues is without doubt the very presence, traditionally rather tiny, today overwhelmingly strong, of adapting literary texts in comics or graphic-novel format, which all critics and readers may envisage in a more critical way than most publishers, which are currently overinvesting this strand in their production plans.

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Notes:

(1.) In this chapter, I adopt a rather strict separation between comics and graphic novels, following the criteria presented in Baetens and Frey.

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Literary Adaptations in Comics and Graphic Novels

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